DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 219 SO 026 354

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TITLE A Tie That Binds: The Concept of Character Formation in Folk Arts in Education and the History of Education in the United States.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethical Instruction; Ethnography; *Folk Culture; Oral Tradition; Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS Arkansas; Florida

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the concept of character formation as it can be positively impacted by folk arts in education. A long-standing tradition in U.S. education is for the teacher to take a leading role in molding the character of young people, as outlined through the years by such scholars as Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and Rachel Davis DuBois. The document compares what these scholars exhorted with what intercultural programs in Florida and Arkansas have proposed, and asserts a prime opportunity exists by such scholars for intercultural education to take place within state guidelines. A function of intercultural education is explored that attempts to shape personality through curriculum, which ultimately enhances student self esteem while promoting the local community's ethics. Contains 11 references. (DQE)

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A TIE THAT BINDS: THE CONCEPT OF CHARACTER FORMATION IN FOLK ARTS IN EDUCATION AND THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Paddles and Questions

In January 1992, I visited three school principals in southwest Arkansas to prepare for a Folk Arts in Education project. The first principal led me into his office on a brisk January afternoon. He took a seat behind his desk and I sat on the other side. The first thing I saw on the desk was a small wooden paddle. Not too thick, thin enough for just enough bounce, convincing enough to make my heart skip a beat. A swift reminder that corporal punishment is alive and well in this part of the South for character development Throughout our visit, the paddle didn't move, but this principal knew that I was thinking about it as I described how a five-day Folk Arts in Education program worked in Southwestern Arkansas. Day one: lay the groundwork for studying traditions and define concepts by looking at traditions and folklife in our lives and in a slide show on regional traditional culture in the region. Second day: review day one and explore how to learn about other people's traditions. For on the third and fourth days we would be meeting tradition bearers identified through the TRAHC Folklife Program. What we'd do, I explained, would first determine that the visitor was from the same area as the students, then find out if his or her skills were traditional. Then we would talk with the visitor about their traditional skills. We would also do something during those meetings in which the students could get a feel for the traditional skill.

The last day of the unit would be a review, a discussion of four basic functions of tradition -- entertainment, education, social cohesion, and utility -- and an evaluation of the unit.

I described how teachers would be involved in classes and how they would receive curriculum materials and objectives correlations with state objectives in social studies. We had already discussed the unit as a part of the required Arkansas social studies course of study for the fourth grade.

I asked: "What do you think the students will get from this unit and meeting tradition bearers?" The answer would figure greatly in my selection of tradition bearers to visit the school. "I think the students need to know the value of hard work," he said. The principal wanted the students to know that the heritage of southwestern Arkansas was gained through hard work -- not free rides -- and that's what makes people successful today. The teachers at this school felt that what their principal said was true, but they also felt that FAIE could build self esteem in their students, as well as add to the social studies curriculum.

At a second school, the paddle was nowhere in sight. The principal felt that FAIE could advance social studies and enhance student self esteem. Whereas the students at the first school I visited were bussed in from town and from rural communities, most of the students at this second school lived in the immediate area of their school, where there were problems with gangs, shootings, robberies, and lots of drugs. The teachers agreed that the program was a great link to Arkansas Studies and

that the tradition bearers could actually serve as role models for the students.

At the third school, another community school serving the immediate area, the paddle was on the floor near me. This paddle had holes - the kind that make the paddle whistle as it nears the target. Again, I asked, "What can this program give your students?" The principal didn't blink: "The students will tell you - I won't need to do that for them." But she did add that the social studies focus would enhance the Arkansas Studies component.

Why did I ask the principals and teachers these questions? Yes, I use the information to get a sense of which tradition bearers would fit with which school. I also want to make sure that teachers and principals won't view the unit as a threat to valuable class time. Following Progressive Education's attempts to quantify learning in classrooms, which in educational parlance is "time on task," teachers and students are required to spend x amount of time on a particular subject, and a total of x minutes on subject areas. If the FAIE unit doesn't fit into the scheme of minutes, the unit is a threat.

Thus, FAIE designed as a part of the social studies curriculum, will be considered time on task. My question to the teachers and principals opens the door to FAIE and its many functions.

I want to explore one function of FAIE that I think closely binds folklore and education. This is what I call "character formation," the attempt to shape personality through curriculum. Sometimes, it is shaped through discipline. Those paddles are

loaded with meaning.

In this paper I'd like to describe the kinds of character that educationists proposed for the United States. Then I'll compare what they exhorted with what FAIE programs in Florida and Arkansas have proposed. What I suggest is that given the business-orientation of education, educators are not focussing on character development as they desired in the past. They have not, however, put it aside, and to that end, folklorists in education take up the slack. But we have to do it within the framework of the school, and that means being "on task" and to a certain degree accountable for what we "teach."

Thinking About Character

As a man of plans thought out and put into action for the creation of an American republic, Thomas Jefferson gave a lot of thought to education. In "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," (1778), Jefferson explained that no one could be ignorant and free. Education had to create an informed citizenry that would contribute to the growth of the new republic. His colleague Benjamin Rush wrote in 1786 that education would produce "a self reliant, free, and informed people whose common strength would be their love of country and their widely shared moral standards" (in Smith: 1973:241). For Rush, a citizen of good character was a Christian who "cannot fail of being a republican..." (ibid. 250). Education would instill the prejudice of patriotism and awareness of "the whole family of mankind." (op cit 251). Thus the teacher had to set an example and teach all subjects, especially the Bible.

Horace Mann (1796 - 1859), who is credited with shaping the public school in the United States, had a specific idea of the character to be shaped by education: "In sentiment [education] should inculcate all kindly and social feelings; the love of external nature; regard and sympathy for domestic animals; consideration and benevolence toward every sentient thing, whether it flies, creeps or swims; all filial all brotherly and sisterly affections; respect for age, compassion for the sick, the ignorant, the destitute, and for those who suffer under a privation of the senses or of reason; the love of country, and holds all contemporaries and all posterity in its wide embrace; a passion for duty and a homage for all men who do it; and emphatically should it present such religious views as will lead children to fulfill the first great commandment - to love the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their mind (Mann: 1845, in Church: 1976:89).

Mann thought that with the right kind of teacher (one who possessed the above traits) character formation could take place via the standard curriculum in language arts, mathematics, and history. He also felt that instruction in vocal music could contribute to character formation, not only because it promoted good physical health (exercising the lungs and vocal cords), because it also encouraged spiritual well being by stimulating cheerfulness and the genial flow of spirits, utilizing something the children had -- voices for singing and ears for listening.

The concept of working with skills and experiences children already possessed leans toward "child-centered" education. This is usually associated with John Dewey,

but can also be found in the works of philosopher-educators Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) and Pestalozzi (b. 1746). Mann was a close student of Pestalozzi. The child-centered character formation proposed by Pestalozzi stated that "children should begin learning by studying about things they could sense and things they already knew rather than by studying abstractions. ... The curriculum should rely on activities with which the child was familiar at home" (in Church: 1976:96-98). But that didn't mean that learning (including character training) was to be easy. Education, in this early child-centered philosophy, should be relatively difficult because it strengthened character, thus preparing children for the business of life.

Education philosopher John Dewey expanded on Pestalozzi. Writing on The Child and the Curriculum in 1902, Dewey defined the educative process as an interactive power: "The fundamental factors in the educative process are an immature, undeveloped being; and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these forces" (Dewey: 1902, 1956:4). The development of a child's character required shaping his or her abilities at experiencing the world around him or her. Successful character formation would show "... increase in toleration ... breadth of social judgement, the larger acquaintance with human nature, ... sharpened alertness in reading signs of character and interpreting social situations, greater accuracy of adaptation to differing personalities, [and] contact with greater commercial activities." (ibid:12).

The kind of direct, interactive experiences proposed by Dewey were connected

to the study of history. Students would conduct micro-ethnographies of areas around their schools. They would talk with people who worked and lived around their schools. Back in the classroom, the students would discuss what they learned and then reconstruct, often times with building blocks, the physical scenes they experienced. This way of studying history, Dewey believed, enabled "the child to appreciate the value of social life, to see, in imagination, the forces that allow men's cooperation with one another, to understand the sorts of character that help on and that hold back (op cit: 151). Such study would be "moral." For "all education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary, but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth. Interest in learning from all contacts of life is the essential moral interest" (Dewey: 1917, 1966:360).

Dewey, like his predecessors, offered very few actual methods for the development of the characters they envisioned. But his views in particular had especial meaning in the 1920s when immigration was restricted and immigrants, by their very presence, challenged the notion of good character. Educators were faced with the challenge to develop tolerance of ethnic difference in their students -- a new dimension to character formation. This new challenge gave rise to the Intercultural. Education movement (Rosenberg: 1991) spearheaded by Woodbury, New Jersey teacher Rachel Davis DuBois. DuBois felt that all students were impressionable and easily threatened by race prejudice. In her mind, if the child could learn first-hand

about an ethnic group's contributions to life in the United States, he or she would also learn that (1) everyone has ethnic culture and (2) immigrants and other culture groups aren't "bad." In other words, you swap a negative attitude for a positive one. (DuBois: 1940, 1984)

Intercultural Education flourished between 1929 and 1960. It was a four-pronged approach to developing tolerance through research - learning about ethnic contributions from representatives of ethnic groups, meeting representatives of ethnic groups in social situations and in an assembly presentation, and then re-presenting research and interpreting it in a student run assembly. This program was developed for national use. It was phased out when powerful educationists and politicians felt that the course of study smacked of Communism and unorthodox educational practices.

In these trends in educational philosophy and pedagogy the shift is from the creation of citizens for the republic to the betterment of society which in turn would benefit the nation, and perhaps the world. DuBois' work is extends even further: change the child, you change the society: change the society, you can change the republic that creates the culture that changes the child.

These philosophies of education and childhood also show that education, as an institution has never been a simple matter. Jefferson and Rush's education was a voluntary affair (Katz: 1977) By the mid nineteenth century, free schooling for all was mandatory in most Eastern states. By the early 1900s schools had evolved into a business of administrators and educators, associations and unions (ibid). Social and

cultural issues were complex and educationists continually struggled with the problem of how to teach subject matter and inculcate character.

Structurally, education is a business. The over-arching concerns of this business have to do with students' ability to pass tests that will in turn reflect well on the republic. In business terms, are employees, both students and teachers, meeting production quotas?

Strands

Yet the question of developing and maintaining "good character" still stands. This time, however, self esteem and character are not etched into the child tabula rasa. Rather, teachers and principals work with a human being who has already been shaped by many positive and negative experiences And for some school systems, Folk Arts in Education can help as a character formation program that, given its association with Language Arts, Home Economics, Social Studies, and Art, if taught within the framework of the school, is also "time on task" with a restorative feature that elevates self esteem through recognition of the power of traditions.

What kind of character does FAIE try to form and how do we talk about our work? In Palm Beach County, Florida, FAIE's contribution to character formation was the imparting of "increased appreciation of multi-ethnic traditions and a greater sense of place to Palm Beach County's public school students. In Duval County, Florida, FAIE served "to enhance cultural pride, regional identity, and inter-ethnic and inter-generational understanding." Both projects interpreted traditional cultural heritage "as

an integral part of the their Florida Studies lessons." In southwestern Arkansas, I apply the same kind of rhetoric as I describe FAIE as a segment of the Arkansas Studies curriculum that does double duty: it is Arkansas Studies and it encourages pride in belonging to a region. These units are designed to forge connections between communities, their heritage, their residents, and the schools' requirements to cover specific topics and achieve certain objectives.

FAIE is interested in creating informed citizens, people who can contribute to a diverse national heritage through a developed awareness of interacting cultures, or interculturalism. Whereas programs prior to FAIE promoted a streamlining or even a downright purge of cultural diversity, FAIE, for the briefest period allowed in a school day (next to recess, perhaps) encourages stretching diversity to such an extent that students see themselves and each other, along with residents from their communities, as tradition bearers contributing, in one way or another, to a common good.

With that in mind, I'll go back to southwestern Arkansas. I charted the course of meetings between regional tradition bearers and students. The students whose princpal wanted them to learn about hard work met a farmer and cowboy. The students at the school whose principal was concerned with self esteem talked with a jazz drummer and saxophonist. The students at the third school met a leather worker whose specialty is state trooper belts and rigging, and were also surprised with an African-American gospel quartet in which their principal was a member.

Were the students changed by the program? They sure were surprised that

their teachers grew up across the field from the farmer, that one of their own was a great grandson to the drummer, and that their principal was a traditional singer.

The social studies part of the program worked. Certain things could be measured: a new vocabulary (folk, folklife, tradition); geography (where the students lived in relation to the state; where the tradition bearers came from); geographical comprehension (comprehending that the tradition bearers lived near the students); social studies (traditions are a part of heritage). Yes, we have been on task in that department.

But in the area of character formation, we are in the same boat as educationists 200 years ago. We can't measure it. But instead of put it aside, folklorists in education don't expect any quick changes in character. This patience might be one of our strongest points.

Wondering About Caution

Many of us who do FAIE programs hear over and over how much teachers are overloaded by curriculum and administrative demands. They don't have the time for FAIE. But they like FAIE - the students like it - it opens doors to social studies that are often closed because of the time factor. I think, however, that before FAIE programmers move any further toward integrating FAIE into the standard curriculum, we need to find out if FAIE will be caught up in the same problems that teachers have with time and accountability. FAIE runs the risk of being destroyed by those problems. And the one tie that binds FAIE and Education will strangle if we have to yield to those

paddles.

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